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### **Forced Molting of "Laying" Hens--Fact Sheet**

Forced molting is a starvation practice employed by the US egg industry to manipulate egg laying and the economics of production. It involves the removal of ALL food from hens used for commercial egg production for 5 to 14 full days (typically 10 to 14 days) to manipulate the hormones responsible for egg production and feather cover. Forced molting is designed to force the birds to lose 25 to 35 percent of their body weight, particularly the abnormal fat that clogs the birds' oviducts from lack of exercise in confinement.

Forced molting is cruel. In most states, intentionally depriving an animal of sustenance is recognized as cruel and punishable under the law as a misdemeanor or felony. Additionally, the birds' feathers are plucked by other starving birds in their desperate effort to satisfy their hunger. The combined stresses of being plucked by starving cagemates and artificially molted results in the fact that, according to *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 1990, Vol. 25:97-105, during the forced molt, "most parts of their [the hens'] skin are bare with no feathers." Even the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Animal Well-Being Task Group has acknowledged the fact that forced molting diminishes the birds' welfare. Forced molting is prohibited under both U.K. and European legislation.

This practice affects millions of birds. Each year, more than 25 million birds are used for egg laying purposes in California. According to Donald Bell, a poultry specialist at the University of California, Riverside, at least 90 percent are force molted. The egg industry estimates an average death loss of 1.5 percent of molted flocks. This means that well over 300,000 hens die from this starvation practice. Thousands more die subsequent to the molt from stress and crop impaction, as a result of gorging and atrophied muscles.

Forced molting impacts bird and consumer health. Scientific studies show that forced molting causes severe stress in the birds resulting in disease. It significantly depresses the cellular immune response and increases the severity of concurrent intestinal *Salmonella enteritidis* (Se) infection. According to *World Poultry-Misset*, 1996, Vol. 12, No. 9, "While unmolted hens usually have to ingest about 50,000 *Salmonella* cells to become infected, molted hens need fewer than 10." The ability of Se to infect hens' ovaries while their eggs are being formed permits the bacteria to contaminate the contents of intact eggs sold to consumers.

Government agencies agree that forced molting is a severe stress that increases consumer health risks. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety & Inspection Service (USDA-FSIS), "FSIS recognizes that public health concerns are raised by highly stressful forced molting practices. For example, extended starvation and water deprivation practices lead to increased shedding of *Salmonella enteritidis* (Se) by laying hens subjected to these practices. Therefore, in an effort to reduce human illnesses caused by Se, FSIS is encouraging poultry and egg producers to eliminate forced molting practices and adopt alternatives that reduce public health risks" (April 21, 1998). The USDA's Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service stated (August 21, 1998) that the USDA Farm

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Animal Well-Being Task Group expressed "serious concerns regarding the practice of forced molting of poultry" with respect to "the humaneness of this practice as well as the food safety issue." The Group provided a risk assessment (July 21, 1998) that human *Salmonella* infections from eggs could be "reduced by 2.1 percent if forced molting were eliminated." In California, this would translate to approximately 800 cases each year.

**Eggs are the major identified source of *Salmonella enteritidis* (Se) infection in humans.**

According to the USDA, approximately 1 in every 20,000 eggs is infected. This means that, in California, there are at least 330,000 plus infected eggs produced every year. California Public Health Service statistics show that there were 1,219 reported cases of Se in California in 1998 although, according to the National Center for Infectious Diseases, the actual number of cases is at least 38 times the number of those reported. This means that, in California in 1998, there were more than 46,000 cases of Se, 82 percent of which were likely attributable to eggs. According to the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 1998, Vol. 213, No. 12, in 1996, 23 percent of all Se isolates in the United States were from California. And, in 1994, phage type 4 Se was isolated from a poultry farm in California, a type, according to David Swerdlow, an epidemiologist with the CDC, that has been known to be one of the most transmittable forms of Se that may result in a 4-to-5 fold increase in the number of Se illnesses. While the U.S. egg industry has been directed by the USDA to eliminate forced molting, the egg industry fights to retain it, regardless of the human health costs and the birds' suffering.

**Forced molting is a root cause of Se.** Gary D. Butcher, DVM, a poultry veterinarian, and Richard Miles, PhD, a poultry nutritionist at the University of Florida, state unconditionally: "No matter what specific or combination of factors are involved in causing increased susceptibility of laying hens to SE infection, the fact remains that laying hens undergoing a forced molt by feed removal are under stress and are more likely to become salmonella shedders as compared to non-molted hens."

# Starving Hens For Profit Has Got to Stop

by Karen Davis, Ph.D. and Nedim Buyukmihci, V.M.D.

**R**ecently a woman described the shock she experienced while touring an egg factory in Pennsylvania. When the lights were switched on in one of the blacked-out houses, the voices of the hens inside "rose to a cacophony, accompanied by the sound of thousands of beaks pecking on metal. The hens stuck their heads in and out of the cages, pecking at the feed trays, which were empty." The manager explained that this was the first day of a seven-day "fast." The hens were upset because they expected to be fed; by the end of seven days they would be quieter. After losing up to 30 percent of their bodyweight, denuded of feathers, starved, and deranged by fear, they would be stupefied or dead.

If the average person decided to withhold food from their dog or cat for days or weeks, that person would probably be charged with cruelty to animals and the news media would take the story and run with it. Yet, each year the egg industry intentionally deprives millions of hens of food for up to ten days. But the cameras aren't rolling on the hens' behalf and no one is going to jail. This speaks volumes about the way our society views animals used for food. These animals are unprotected against the cruelest practices. Only consider that 98 percent of hens used in egg production in the United States are painfully debeaked and crammed into cages so small they can't assume a single normal body posture.

The practice of starving hens for profit is known as forced-molting. Molting literally refers to the replacement of old feathers by new ones. In nature, birds replace all their feathers in the course of a year to maintain good plumage at all times. A natural molt often happens at the onset of winter, when nature discourages the hatching of chicks. The hen stops laying eggs and concentrates her energies on staying warm and growing new feathers.

The egg industry exploits this natural process by forcing an entire flock to molt simultaneously. This is done to manipulate the marketplace and to pump a few hundred more eggs out of exhausted hens when it is deemed cheaper to "recycle" them rather than immediately slaughter them after a year of relentless egg-laying on a calcium-deficient diet.

To trigger the physiological shock of the forced molt, a University of California poultry researcher (Donald Bell) recommends the removal of all food for no less than five days and as long as fourteen days. Survivors may be force-molted two or three times, based on economics. At any given time over 6 million hens in the U.S. are being systematically starved in their cages, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dr. Peter Dun, an animal scientist from Scotland, said hens are force molted in the United States "until their combs turn blue."

Forced molting should be banned in this country as was done in Great Britain in 1987. In addition to being cruel and immoral, it causes disease. Forced molting is a major cause of *Salmonella* poisoning. USDA studies reported in *Poultry Science* show forced molting in combination with a *Salmonella* infection creates an actual disease state in the alimentary tract of tested hens. Prolonged food deprivation wrecks the hens' immune system, making them prey to the poisonous bacteria that infest the packed confinement buildings in which they lay their eggs.

Currently, there is not a single federal law in the United States to protect poultry from the most outrageous forms of abuse. For this reason, two nonprofit animal advocacy organizations, United Poultry Concerns and the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights, have developed a petition urging the egg industry to take immediate steps to eliminate the cruel practice of forced molting. To date, the industry relies on the notion that Americans couldn't care less how a farm animal is treated. Public pressure is crucial. Readers wishing to receive more information, including a copy of the petition to stop the forced molting of laying hens, are encouraged to write to United Poultry Concerns, PO Box 150, Machipongo, VA 23405-0150 ([www.upc-online.org](http://www.upc-online.org)); and the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights, PO Box 208, Davis, CA 95617 ([www.avar.org](http://www.avar.org)).

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